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Drug firms' manufactured buzz

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NO ONE minds much when a champion athlete or Hollywood star uses a ghostwriter. But what if the ghostwriter is writing under the name of a renowned medical researcher and getting paid by the pharmaceutical firm whose new drug the researcher is extolling?

This form of ghostwriting is all too common in the promotion of drugs in the dog-eat-dog world of pharmaceutical blockbusters. Now, Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, a medical-ethics watchdog, is putting pressure on the National Institutes of Health to do all it can to curb the practice. All medical schools should forbid their personnel from lending their names, and the universities' prestige, to medical journal articles they did not have a meaningful role in creating. Boston University, Tufts, and Harvard have such policies. By the same token, medical journals should follow the lead of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors and insist that authors actually write the articles that bear their name or participate in the research described.

The most recent revelation of a drug company using this technique to promote a product involves GlaxoSmithKline's antidepressant Paxil. According to the Associated Press, lawyers in a personal-injury and wrongful death suit against the company have an internal Glaxo memo with instructions for its salespeople to approach physicians and offer to help them write and publish articles describing the positive experiences their patients have had in taking Paxil.

Similarly, a court case over Wyeth's hormone-replacement therapy drugs was the source of revelations about ghostwritten articles praising the benefits of the drugs and downplaying their risks. Medical journals continued to publish the Wyeth-funded articles even after federally funded researchers determined that post-menopausal women taking certain hormones faced an increased risk of breast cancer and heart disease.

The positive buzz that ghostwritten articles can create around a new medication is as manufactured as the gauzy TV ads showing the benefits of painkillers or acid-reflux drugs. When doctors - or members of the public at large - see an article bearing a researcher's or clinician's name, they should have confidence that the author wrote the article or contributed substantially to the study.

The National Institutes of Health, medical schools, journals, and professional organizations all have a role to play in making ghostwriting a clear violation of their ethical codes. Hired-gun wordsmiths have no place in the important process of physicians and patients informing themselves about new treatments. ■

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